

BELGIAN SOLDIERS' PERCEPTIONS OF THE ENEMY DURING THE  
FIRST WORLD WAR, 1914 - 1918

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Submitted to the faculty of the University Graduate School  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree  
Master of Arts  
in the Department History,  
Indiana University

August 2009

Accepted by the Faculty of Indiana University, in partial  
fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.

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Dedicated to my father and mother

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

During my time working on this thesis, many helped me along, each in their own way, and I would like to thank of them here. Dr Kevin Cramer, my adviser on this thesis, and other members of my committee, Dr William H. Schneider, Dr William Foley and Dr Monroe H. Little; IUPUI and the History department for accepting me as a graduate student, and the Office of International Affairs for doing all the paperwork that made it possible for me to study in the USA; all the libraries, achieves, databases, websites and shops that supplied me with the materials I used in this study; I-House and I-club for offering international students, like me, a place to stay, make friends and relax. All my friends at IUPUI who made my life so much more enjoyable, especially those with whom I had the pleasure to play soccer, Tron who endured having me around as a roommate for four years and Somying Promso; and last but not least my family in Belgium who always supported me.

ABSTRACT  
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The First World War was a long stalemated war in which millions of men fought and died. Many studies have looked at the reasons soldiers fought and stopped fighting. In this study, the perceptions that Belgian soldiers had of their enemy, Germany, are looked at. The Belgian army was stationed on a small part of the front at the coast, the last part of Belgium that is un-occupied. The war can be divided into three phases: the first phase is the invasion until the Germans were stopped, the second begins with the stalemate and the development of trench warfare on the Western Front, and the third and last phase is the pushing back of the Germans and final victory. In the first phase with the invasion and brutality of the Germans in Belgium, Belgian soldiers formed a view of Germans as barbarians, capable of anything. With the second phase the perceptions started to diverge among the men, depending on experience and surroundings of the soldiers; some get use to their new environment, old and new conflicts resurfaced, Germans faded into the background. On the other hand the war was still going on, violence of war was all around them, and brothers in arms were killed. In the third phase soldiers became enthusiastic again because of the prospect of being able to go home. With the ending of the war old grudges were not settled. The Peace treaty was not what was expected. A lot of memorials built at the time reflected views of Germany that very explicitly highlighted their perceived misbehavior, especially at the beginning on the war. Naturally this led to tensions between Belgium and Germany. Many Belgians never forgot what happened during the war, nor let go of their views that were formed.

Kevin Cramer, Ph.D., Chair

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